



# THE INSTITUTE

on Religion  
& Public Policy

## The INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy Religious Freedom Report: Ethiopia

### Executive Summary

(1) The social and political struggles facing Ethiopia today center around competition between Christians and Muslims. The constitution of the Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia provides for the religious freedom of its people. The courts of Ethiopia interpret separation of church and state as prohibiting religious teaching in school. Religious groups have repeatedly ignored these guiding principles, which is evident through recent uprisings. Furthermore, the government risked contradicting Ethiopia's secular stance by passing the 2008 press law against religious incitement and defamation. This law has been criticized as being a tool to limit freedom of expression. The relationship between the United States and Ethiopia is conducive to cooperation in advancing the state of religious freedom as a universal human right in the country.

### The INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy

(2) Nominated multiple times for the Nobel Peace Prize, THE INSTITUTE on Religion and Public Policy is an international, interreligious nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring freedom of religion as the foundation for security, stability, and democracy. THE INSTITUTE works globally to promote fundamental rights and religious freedom in particular, with government policy makers, religious leaders, business executives, academics, non-governmental organizations and others. THE INSTITUTE encourages and assists in the effective and cooperative advancement of religious freedom throughout the world.

### Religious Demographics and Historical Background

(3) Statistical information regarding the religious demography of Ethiopia is unreliable. Estimates based on the 2007 census place the current population of Ethiopia at just below 91 million people. Of those people: 43.5 percent are Orthodox, 33.9 percent are Muslim, 18.6 percent are Protestant, traditional religions account for 2.6 percent of the population and Roman Catholicism accounts for .7 percent.<sup>1</sup>

(4) Christian missionaries first came to Ethiopia in 300 AD. Ethiopia is the only country mentioned in the Sacred Scriptures of all three Abrahamic faiths.<sup>2</sup>

(5) In 1493, Christian missionaries were sent from Portugal to develop influence in the region. The resulting tension between supporters of Christianity and those in opposition led to all missionaries being expelled from the country in the 1630's. Residual hostility remaining in Ethiopia towards both Christianity and Europe led to the Ethiopian isolation that lasted into the mid-1800s. In the period between 1850 and 1913, the Christian nobles of Ethiopia controlled the politics and consolidated power

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<sup>1</sup> CIA World FactBook. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/et.html>

<sup>2</sup> Background Notes: Ethiopia. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2859.htm>

internally as well as ceasing the isolationist policy and beginning international interaction. Ethiopian rulers jockeyed for power between the imperial countries in the bordering regions and Egypt.<sup>3</sup>

(6) In 1991 the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the government and began democratic reform. The Federal Democratic Republic of Ethiopia, a multi-party democratic state, began in 1994 under Prime Minister Meles Zenawi.<sup>4</sup>

#### Introduction to Legal Status

(7) The constitution of the Ethiopian Republic provides protection for freedom of conscience and religious affiliation. Article 11 of the constitution requires the separation of church and state in Ethiopia and restricts the direct interference of the state in religious affairs and the interference of religious organizations in state affairs. Article 27 of the constitution allows for the freedom of religion, belief and opinion. This article extends to include the freedom to teach, practice, worship and observe the tenants of their chosen religion both in seclusion and with their community. Article 29 of the Ethiopian constitution provides for the freedom of expression, thought and opinion.<sup>5</sup>

(8) A law passed in 2008 asserts that it is illegal to incite religious groups against each other. The law also includes a provision that prohibits the defamation of religious groups in the press.<sup>6</sup>

(9) The Ethiopian government requires the registration of religious groups for them to have legal standing. Being granted legal standing permits religious groups to open bank accounts and to partake in court proceedings. The Charities and Societies Proclamation passed in 2010 considerably reduced the registration requirements for religious groups in Ethiopia, but it added the requirement that humanitarian aid groups that are affiliated with churches need to register separately as NGO's in order to operate. The proclamation also included a ten percent limit on aid brought in from foreign sponsors in particular fields of work. Non Governmental Organizations need to reregister with the Ministry of Justice every three years. Religious minority groups have complained of unfair treatment as the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council (EIASC) have repeatedly failed to reregister and have not received government sanction for the neglect.<sup>7</sup>

(10) In certain instances the government allocates public land for religious groups to construct buildings. Accusations from religious minorities of inequitable distribution of the public land also occur. This prompted the Ministry of Federal Affairs to push for the standardization of land allocation. Particularly in the heavily Orthodox region of Axum, Muslim requests for public lands in order to build a Mosque were repeatedly denied.<sup>8</sup>

(11) Negotiations are taking place for the return of land previously held by religious organizations that was confiscated by the government in the period between 1977 and 1991 during the brutal reign of the

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<sup>3</sup> The Reestablishment of the Ethiopian Monarchy. <http://countrystudies.us/ethiopia/13.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Background Notes: Ethiopia. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2859.htm>

<sup>5</sup> Ethiopian Constitution. <http://www.salamta.net/Downloads/Ethiopian%20Constitution.htm>

<sup>6</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

<sup>7</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

<sup>8</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

Derg.<sup>9</sup> The instruction of religion in schools is prohibited due to the interpretation of the courts on the constitutional church-state separation. This extends to private and Catholic schools.<sup>10</sup>

(12) Work visas are denied to religious workers attempting to enter Ethiopia unless the workers are attached to a registered development group. Complaints have arisen from religious minorities that the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Ethiopian Islamic Affairs Supreme Council have repeatedly overstepped this rule and have yet to be penalized.<sup>11</sup>

#### Specific Instances of Religious Persecution

(13) The Ethiopian law against religious incitement and defamation in the press includes broad wording that leaves religious minorities vulnerable to interpretive discrimination. This systemic problem has led to multiple arrests in the country. In addition to legislative problems, Ethiopian religious tension manifests in violent civil attacks.

(14) On May 27<sup>th</sup> 2009 the child of an Ethiopian woman who had recently converted from the Ethiopian Orthodox Church to an Evangelical Church passed away. Days after the child was buried in an Evangelical graveyard in the village of Luga (located 100 miles from the capital), the body was dug up and placed on the front of the local Evangelical leader's doorstep. Authorities went through the motions of an investigation but released all suspect within hours. The church leader said that this was one of a slew of attacks on himself and his family since he began his work in the village.<sup>12</sup>

(15) Two Christian Evangelicals in Ethiopia endured first civil violence against them and later harsh treatment following imprisonment for the alleged crime of bribing citizens to convert to Christianity. They were first attacked by a mob on July 9, 2009 after a heated argument. They found sanctuary in a home until the police arrived, but then were taken to jail on embellished charges. They appealed the case successfully on October 8<sup>th</sup> of that year only to be held for a new charge. After months of harassment they finally appealed the additional charges and were released on October 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>13</sup>

(16) On April 15, 2011 Ethiopian Orthodox Church members attacked Evangelical churches in Olenkomi a village 40 miles west of the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa. The attackers destroyed two churches: a Mekane Yesus Church and a Brethren Church in the area as well as beating one man nearly to death after covering him in gasoline and threatening to burn him alive. The attackers became infuriated when he resisted their compulsion to burn a bible. Three others suffered injuries in the attack.<sup>14</sup>

(17) On March 7, 2011 a large Muslim mob numbering in the thousands became violent and burned 59 churches and 28 homes. The attacks began in Asendaba in Ethiopia's western region and spread to the villages of Chiltie, Gibel Gibe, Gibe, Nada, Dimtu, Uragay, Busa and Koticha. There has been one

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<sup>9</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

<sup>10</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

<sup>11</sup> International Religious Freedom Report. <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Corpse of Ethiopian Christian Convert's Infant Dug Up.

<http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/ethiopia/4718>

<sup>13</sup> Two Evangelists Released from Prison. <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/ethiopia/11092>

<sup>14</sup> Christians in Ethiopian Town Hit by Unexpected Attack.

<http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/ethiopia/17341>

confirmed death but the discovery of many more seems likely according to locals. The attacks displaced 4000 Christians.<sup>15</sup>

#### U.S. Foreign Policy

(18) With the development of democracy in Ethiopia, its relationship with the U.S. has improved dramatically. An ambassador was reinstated in the country in 1992 and the quantity of aid to Ethiopia vastly increased as well. Between 1999 and 2009 \$4.7 billion in aid was transferred to Ethiopia. Continued aid efforts are concentrated on agricultural development, infrastructure development, epidemic relief, the advancement of democracy, and market liberalization.<sup>16</sup>

(19) The U.S. government advances religious freedom in Ethiopia by encouraging interfaith dialogues, events and doing community outreach. The U.S. government's Media Information Support Team organized multiple events to support religious pluralism in 2010.<sup>17</sup>

#### Conclusion

(20) Instances of religious violence stemming from both religious groups and local government officials occur on a semi-regular basis in Ethiopia. The 2008 law on religious incitement is problematic for the advancement of religious freedom. Rather than hindering the violence that occurs in particular regions of the country, this law has provided a tool for religious discrimination in Ethiopia's decentralized areas. The large-scale uprising that occurred in 2010 severely hindered the progress that the efforts of the federal government made towards religious freedom in Ethiopia.

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<sup>15</sup> One Dead as Islamist Mobs in Ethiopia Destroy Church Buildings.  
<http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/ethiopia/69496>

<sup>16</sup> Background Notes: Ethiopia. <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2859.htm>

<sup>17</sup> State Gov. Religious Freedom Report <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2010/148688.htm>